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An Untitled Goose by Any Other Name:

A Critical Theorization of the Indie Game Genre

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An Untitled Goose by Any Other Name:

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An Untitled Goose by Any Other Name: A Critical Theorization of the Indie Game Genre

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As the field of ludomusicology has grown increasingly mainstream within music studies, a methodological trend has emerged in discussions of genre that privileges the formal attributes of game sound while giving relatively little attention to aspects of its production. The problems with this methodological bent become apparent when attempting to discuss the independent ("indie") game genre, since, from 2010-2020 the indie game genre underwent a number of significant changes in aesthetic trends, many of which seem incoherent with one another. As such, the indie genre has received relatively little attention within the ludomusicological literature despite its enormous impact on broader gaming culture.

By analyzing the growth of chiptune aesthetics beginning in 2008 and the subsequent fall from popularity towards 2020, this paper considers how a satisfying understanding of the indie game genre can be ascertained through its material cultures, rather than its aesthetics or gameplay. It ultimately posits an understanding of the indie genre as ever-changing in its gameplay and aesthetic design so as to best set itself apart from mainstream game design practices.

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Introduction

At the Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences' 2020 D.I.C.E. Awards,[1] the battle for the Game of the Year seemed to be between two of the most talked-about (and most played) AAA titles[2] from 2019: Kojima Entertainment's bizarre and beautiful open-world action game *Death Stranding* and Remedy Entertainment's mind-bending and enthralling action-adventure game *Control*, with seven total nominations for the former and eight for the latter (Hall 2020). While both of those games did have reasonable showings, taking home two and four awards, respectively, neither one ended up being the star of the evening. Both titles were instead overshadowed by developer House House's independently developed and distributed title *Untitled Goose Game*, nominated for four awards and taking home three of them. Among its accolades was the coveted Game of the Year award, making *Untitled Goose Game* the second independently developed game and the first independently distributed game to ever receive the honor in the ceremony's 22-year history.[3] This victory, in conjunction with the creation of the "Outstanding Achievement for an Independent Game" award in 2019, suggests a growing respect for the indie game genre, at least among the industry professionals who vote in the D.I.C.E. awards.

And yet the awards success of *Untitled Goose Game* simultaneously brings into relief the unusual position indie games hold within larger video game culture. Most of the accolades presented at the D.I.C.E. awards come in the form of either a "game of the year" within a

[1] "D.I.C.E." is an acronym representing the academy's creative goals: "design, innovate, communicate, entertain."

[2] The AAA designation is used for games produced and distributed by well-established game studios, which typically have greater resources at their disposal in terms of personnel, industry connections, and, perhaps most significantly, development and marketing budgets.

[3] The first independently developed Game of the Year winner was 2011's *Journey*, which was produced by the indie studio Thatgamecompany under a contract with Sony Entertainment and, upon its completion, was distributed directly by Sony as a PlayStation exclusive. Thus, while its development was independent of major game studios, its distribution was not.

particular genre (e.g. Sports Game of the Year, Racing Game of the Year, and Fighting Game of the Year) or an outstanding achievement award for some technical aspect of production (e.g. Outstanding Achievement in Animation, Outstanding Achievement in Original Music Composition, and Outstanding Achievement in Character). Thus, the award for "Outstanding Achievement for an Independent Game" implies that "independent" is first and foremost a mode of production rather than a genre category, as the alternative "Independent Game of the Year" award would suggest. An "outstanding achievement" award for indie game production further suggests that a game possesses some measure of achievement in "independent production" separate from its achievement in any of the other categories such as score or voice acting. That is, just as one might claim the soundtrack to a game is spectacular despite lackluster graphics, one could argue a game shows great achievement in its "independent development" in spite of sub-par narrative or voice acting, for example. This understanding of *indie-ness* is further underscored by the nomination of some of the games in the Independent Game Design category in separate genre-specific Game of the Year categories.[4] There remains one glaring peculiarity in the 2019 nominations, however: *Untitled Goose Game* received no nominations for any genre-specific Game of the Year Awards despite its prize for overall Game of the Year. While the bureaucracy within this awards ceremony is opaque enough to make determining a specific reason for this odd occurrence quite difficult, it is reasonable to imagine that the lack of a genre-specific nomination is due to a lack of clearly defined genre for the game, at least among the already established categories within the ceremony.

[4] This list includes *Disco Elysium*, nominated for Role-Playing Game of the Year, and *A Short Hike*, nominated for Family Game of the Year, both in addition to their Outstanding Achievement in Independent Game Design nominations

This is perhaps why many others in various video game communities have not emulated the D.I.C.E. awards' choice to avoid "indie" as a genre category. On both the Steam and Epic Games stores (two of the most popular online game marketplaces), "indie" is a searchable genre category alongside well-established categories defined by gameplay mechanics like adventure, racing, and sports.[5] It is also common to hear of players organizing themselves around indie games as others might around fighting games or MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game), establishing community through a shared appreciation of that genre. Disputes over how video game genres are—or should be—classified certainly extend beyond awards shows and players, however. There is also a sizeable academic literature exploring the most effective ways to establish genre categories and classify games into them.

Clarke et al. (2017) provide an overview of the challenge of game genre classification from a variety of standpoints including marketing, education, and chiefly, library and information science. While a full summary of this literature is unnecessary here, there are certain contributions worth touching upon. Some of the earliest attempts at systematic genre classification in video games include types of gameplay such as Chris Crawford's (1984) "skill-and-action" vs. "strategy" dichotomy or Mark Wolf's (2001) far more granular system of 42 separate genre categories based on gameplay. While notable contributions, these early attempts did not exert influence beyond their academic environments due to a lack of applicability for

[5] It is worth noting here that many game genre categories suggest (and are suggested by) signifiers that are simultaneously aesthetic and mechanical. For example, racing games suggest aesthetic elements like checkered flags on racetracks, references to high-speeds and intense competition, and brightly-colored, aerodynamic racing vehicles (be they cars, spaceships, or what have you); but also suggest gameplay mechanics like driving controls (which are often relatively similar across different racing games), multiple laps around racetracks and corresponding lap times, and vehicle choices with differing ratings for various relevant metrics like speed and handling. While I here consider these genre categories to be defined by gameplay mechanics, some could just as comfortably be considered in terms of their aesthetic signifiers.

game developers or players. Aarseth et al. (2003) attempted to correct for this by creating a system of five categories: space, time player structure, control, and rules, each with additional subcategories with their own parameters. This classification system, while useful for facilitating communication within and between groups of developers, academics, and players alike, was also ultimately not widely adopted because it did not connect to the common terminology with which players and industry professionals were already familiar by that time. By the late 2000s, attempts at inventing new genre classification systems for video games largely faded away, replaced instead by discussions surrounding the purposes of game genre classification and how existing genre labels can be best adapted to fit them (Lee et al. 2015).

The study of video games within music studies (broadly termed *ludomusicology*) does not have as extensive a history as it does in some other disciplines, and most discussion of genre as it pertains to game sound occurs only tangentially. Among the first to write on games from the standpoint of music studies was Karen Collins in her foundational study *Game Sound* (2008). In a 2020 reflection on her experience writing the book and the impact it has had on the field, she remarks:

> Looking back, when I first started research for *Game Sound* in 2002, it was a very different world in which to write the book. The web was still much in its infancy, and getting information for the research was difficult. There wasn't the fan community online in those days—no collected archives of material, and very little information. There was also no other scholarly writing about game sound available that I could find at the time. Most journals were not yet indexed online, and we had to physically go to a library! There were very few interviews with sound designers or composers online (and certainly no video), and there was no social media to speak of in which to get in touch with people. This was pre-MySpace, never mind Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, or other

> ways we use to contact people today. I had to purchase hard copies of games. Fortunately, at that time, people were only too happy to give me their old computers, which were worthless then but have gained value now, and I recall fondly rescuing a collection of thirty-two Commodore 64s from landfill. (2020: 100-101)

Collins emphasizes here the central importance physical artifacts of gameplay—the consoles, the discs and cartridges, the sound chips—had in her research. While this focus was largely born out of necessity due to the barriers preventing research involving industry professionals and/or players at the time, the emphasis on the technologies themselves as primary sources does influence much of Collins' work in *Game Sound*. Because much of the work grows out of a technical understanding of how sound is created and implemented and the functions it fulfills on particular consoles and in particular games, there is relatively little discussion of potentially relevant cultural determinants of video game scoring practices.

For example, in her chapter entitled "Gameplay, Genre, and the Functions of Game Audio," Collins begins with genre labels identified by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) as the most commercially popular: fighting, role-playing, children and family entertainment, action, adventure, strategy, shooter, racing, and sports.[6] She notes:

> Game genres such as these are distinguished through several main characteristics, such as narrative, representational rules . . . , rules of gameplay, and types of interactivity or

[6] Often, those genre labels that may not suggest as much at face value are still defined by mechanical gameplay design. For example, "action" and "adventure" are both labels that could easily refer to numerous parameters, aesthetic, mechanical (that is, pertaining to gameplay mechanics), social, or otherwise. Yet the D.I.C.E. awards still use definitions of these genres that rely predominantly on mechanics, describing action games as those that "follow the gameplay from the perspective of the character that the player is controlling" and "feature heavy weapons use and/or involve characters engaged in combat while moving through a linear or open environment," as opposed to adventure games in which "players are challenged with real-time action activities where timing, skill and accuracy are necessary to succeed. Puzzle-solving, resource management and exploration often drive the quest-oriented narrative rather than primarily combat mechanics." Definitions taken from the D.I.C.E awards website at www.interactive.org/awards/

> interface with the player. Each of these characteristics has a distinct impact on the ways in which audio functions in terms of its relationship to the play, and to the game's narrative or diegesis." (Collins 2008a, 124)

The chapter then proceeds through a discussion of the common functions of music within each of these genres (which, as Collins notes, are defined through relatively mechanical parameters) in terms of diegesis and adaptation or interactivity.[7] Collins thus begins with genre categories already defined through collections of mechanical functions and adds her contribution by appending additional functional parameters located in audio. While this formalist linkage of genre distinctions and audio functions is certainly an effective strategy for theorizing genre as it relates to video game audio (particularly for a field still in its infancy), it is limited in how it privileges musical function at the expense of social and historical details beyond the boundaries of a game itself.

Privileging formal functions of music in games exemplifies a contemporary neoliberal tendency to search for extrinsic value in things that were not necessarily intended to be considered in such a way. David Harvey explains that when societies presume the free market to be the ideal vehicle for healthy economic growth (an ideology central to economic policies in both the United States and United Kingdom in the 1980s), it is only inevitable that things previously considered outside the bounds of commodification, such as prisons or hospitals, come to be viewed as untapped streams of potential revenue (Harvey 2005, 165-167). While Harvey is speaking here of commodification in the legal and economic sense, Timothy Taylor argues that a purely economic understanding of neoliberalism "is insufficient to understanding

[7] Collins defines adaptive audio as "sound that reacts to the game states, responding to various in-game parameters such as time-ins, time-outs, player health, enemy health, and so on," as opposed to interactive audio, which "refers to those sounds events that react to a player's direct inputs," such as the sound effect that accompanies Mario's jump in *Super Mario Bros*. (4)

how neoliberal—or any—capitalism shapes, and is shaped by, the cultures in which it finds itself." An adequate understanding of neoliberalism, Taylor contends, must instead acknowledge that neoliberalism comprises an entire culture, a "whole way of being and thinking" (2016, 44-45). Marianna Ritchey echoes this sentiment, describing neoliberal culture as "the widespread acceptance, in US culture at large, of the idea that a product's (or a person's) ability to generate profit on a competitive free market is an index of social value" (2019, 3).

Thus, the Marxist concepts of use- and exchange-value have come to have application beyond Marx's original theorization of literal commodities. John Byrne, in an article considering the use-value of art, highlights the important ideological implications of Marx's categorizations when applied in this way, explaining:

> Use-value, for Marx, was both qualitative and bodily, a metaphysical imperative regarding the necessity of material and social production. Exchange value, on the other hand, tended to be equated with the quantitative, as a more abstract function of the mind and soul. This analytical attempt to separate the bodily, material and qualitative from the mental, abstract and quantitative is also familiar from the famous 'base and superstructure' metaphor that Marx employed in his 'Preface to A Critique of Political Economy' (1859). Here, a real, material and economic base (which Marx suggested could be analysed with the accuracy of science) is seen as the true driving force of history, producing the ideological superstructure of law, politics, ethics, and culture (2016, 15).

The base/superstructure distinction carries the implication that art is relegated to the role of merely reflecting the underlying economic determinants of culture, rather than being a significant influence itself. It is in response to this notion, Byrne argues, that arguments for the value of art have sought to redeem use-value, leading (perhaps inadvertently) to the valuation of art *in terms of* a perceived use-value. Despite the formalist focus in *Game Sound* being at least somewhat due to the limited resources available at the time of writing (in terms of both relevant

primary sources and related scholarly literature with which to dialogue), it still invests significant effort into discovering the use-value for the video game soundtrack.

And this formalist approach to genre (and consequential prizing of use-value) in ludomusicology has in many ways persisted despite increased access to historical documents, player perspectives, and academic discourse around games and game sound. Many have continued writing on genre employing a methodology similar to Collins's by emphasizing the ways music and sound serve particular functions within different genres of game. Examples of this include the use of sound in horror games as an unreliable signifier of nearby danger (Roberts 2014, Summers 2016) or background music in mystery/detective games clueing players into when they are on the right path towards figuring out a case (Reale 2014). The literature on rhythm games such as *Guitar Hero* and *Dance Dance Revolution* also tends to privilege functional definitions of genre by focusing on relationships between pitch or harmony and rhythm (Fleshner 2016) or entrainment and other sensory modes of perception (Miller 2014, Shultz 2016). While on the surface these are apparently different strategies, these modes of inquiry all still privilege formal aspects of the game itself and a player's interactions with it over social and structural aspects of its production in defining the genre.

Along the same lines, a significant amount of attention has been devoted to the ways 8-bit, 16-bit, and similar aesthetic trends in game design constitute their genres through their reflections of particular technologies. Collins (2007) traces how technological constraints defined what later became aesthetic signifiers of 8-bit games, a game genre that has received quite a bit more attention in the intervening years (Carlsson 2008, Kizzire 2014, Burke 2019) and has been expanded to include other technologically defined genres such as 16-bit (Sextro 2015, Thompson 2019) and 1-bit (Troise 2020). McAlpine (2019) most extensively pursues this line of inquiry in his volume discussing the history of the chiptune genre. While he still largely focuses on the

technologies as arbiters of the genre definition when it comes to chiptune music for games, McAlpine does incorporate discussion of other social influences into his chapter on 1970s computer hacking culture and its influence, up to the present, on the demoscene. Though the chapter's inclusion of these influences in its discussion is valuable, the absence of social considerations in the rest of the study creates a dynamic where chiptune as *music to accompany games* is technologically (or formally) considered, while chiptune as *music for performing and consuming outside of games* is subject to a more critical approach.

A final approach to genre in ludomusicological literature that I wish to touch on here is the defining of genre categories through connections to other, more established fields of research. Examples of this include Ivănescu 2019, who theorizes the "nostalgia game" as an analog to Jameson's (1991) "nostalgia film" in utilizing certain artifacts and practices of an earlier generation, Gibbons 2019, who draws a link between the introduction of spoken dialogue in early cinema (the so-called "part-talkie") and the introduction of pre-recorded sound and dialogue in JRPGs of the mid-to-late 90s, and Hambleton 2020, who borrows from the literature on sound walks and other environmental music experiences to discuss the genre of "walking simulators" (or "navigable narratives," as Hambleton calls them). The strategy of borrowing from work in fields outside of ludomusicology for considering genre has the advantage of inviting a wide variety of scholars into those discussions. Unfortunately, this results in a theoretical focus that is still largely centered on the forms and functions of the games in question, for example, in how they reflect the technologies and trends of the past, as with Ivănescu and Gibbons, or how they represent physical real-world spaces, as with Hambleton.

While these formalist lines of inquiry have fostered a great deal of foundational research in the field of ludomusicology, an overwhelming tendency to focus on the functional attributes of games has led to an unfortunate disregard for material cultures in ludomusicological theories

of genre. Confronting a common theme in the discourse around Western art music regarding the "decline of genre," Eric Drott (2013) proposes: "As an ensemble of correlations, a genre is not so much a *group* as a *grouping*, the gerund ending calling attention to the fact that it is something that must be continually produced and reproduced. Genres, in other words, result from acts of assemblage, acts performed by specific agents in specific social and institutional settings" (10). Drott centers the structural institutions that affect how and why genre groupings may be defined at any given moment in time, affording a degree of flexibility to those groupings to better account for genres that tend to produce quite a bit of individualistic experimentation (in Drott's case, the genre in question is spectralist music of the twentieth century). This definition of genre also highlights the way genre is linked to ideology—an important connection that is lost when genres are considered as primarily collections of formal practices.

The purpose of this paper is to consider the indie games as a category of video game whose the proliferation of innovative content has already begun erode established frameworks for defining genre. The pitfalls of relying on formal parameters for defining genre groupings will only continue to become more apparent as new indie games continue to push boundaries at an accelerating rate due to online game marketplaces providing easily accessible avenues for distribution. Thus, I argue an understanding of genre groupings that is sensitive to the material cultures of video games is necessary for the concept of genre to continue to have applicability within ludomusicology. To show how the material cultures of indie games can provide insight into ever-changing trends within the genre, I intend to look at a specific trend that has been (and in some circles, still is) considered "quintessentially indie": chiptunes.

In the mid-2010s a slew of indie games featuring pixelated graphics, mechanics inspired by the SNES, and, in some cases, chiptune music, reached massive popularity. Some notable

titles include: *The Binding of Isaac* (2014), *Undertale* (2014), *Shovel Knight* (2014), *Broforce* (2015), *Nuclear Throne* (2015), *Crypt of the Necrodancer* (2015), *Hyper Light Drifter* (2016), *Stardew Valley* (2016), *Enter the Gungeon* (2016), and *OneShot* (2016). This wave of games could suggest a coalescence of the indie genre around a relatively unified aesthetic, marking a shift towards its becoming a genre more readily defined by aesthetic and mechanical parameters, as is common with other video game genres. However, the past few years have seen a decline in the popularity of pixel or 8-bit aesthetics and gameplay in the indie genre. For example, of the five nominees for the aforementioned Indie Game award at the 2020 D.I.C.E. awards, only one (*A Short Hike)* features pixel graphics, and none feature chiptune music or obviously retro game mechanics. This contrasts with the previous year, when four out of the five nominees featured some mix of 8-bit graphics, mechanics, and soundtracks.

Within the formalist framing of genre that underpins much of the ludomusicological literature, this shift makes little sense. If a genre is to be defined by adherence to a set of formal expectations, should trends within that genre not then generally support the fulfillment of those expectations, developing only in ways that improve a game's ability to do so? By exploring how chiptunes became an identifying feature of indie games and why the genre as a whole seems to be moving away from them, I intend to demonstrate how the forces that chiefly define design trends in the indie genre are not formal functions or technological developments but rather modes of production and community cultures.

Finding an Aesthetic Identity

In 1977, Atari released the first widely available home gaming system that could play music: the Video Computer System (VCS), later rebranded as the Atari 2600. Programming music for the VCS was arduous, to say the least, and since its sound chip (the Television Interface Adapter or TIA) was manufactured by Atari for their own propriety use, access to that

programming knowledge was also not widely available—a fact true of all video game consoles and home computers at the time (Collins 2008, 20-21). The challenge presented by impenetrable programming protocols deterred all but the most dedicated hobbyists from trying to create their own programs or music using the technology for the following decade.

Most of those who were willing to take on the challenge of learning how to program with the VCS and other consoles of the late 1970s were not chiefly concerned with expressing personal creativity. Rather, that task was primarily undertaken by hackers who sought to break through copyright protections put in place by corporations like Atari and Apple to prevent the free distribution of their software. Obviously, hacking these software protections took quite a bit of computing prowess. As such, notoriety in the hacking community came to those who could hack the most advanced of these protections in the shortest amount of time—a clear metric of who was the most skillful (McAlpine 2019, 158-60). The speed and complexity of hacks was not the only indicator of one's hacking abilities, however. Once a piece of software was successfully cracked, most hackers would decline to distribute it in its original form, instead adding their own calling card in the form of a "crack screen" that displayed the name(s) (usually aliases) of whoever was involved in the hack, often alongside music and animations. Since programming audio was such an laborious challenge, adding complex music to a crack intro served as an additional demonstration of a hacker or group of hackers' programing skill (Driscoll and Diaz 2009, 3.3). Thus, most of the earliest independently produced chiptune music was not actually made to accompany video games, but rather to demonstrate technical prowess in the introductions to hacked copies of proprietary software.

In contrast, some people were at the same time making efforts to increase accessibility to music production on personal computers and home consoles. Pieces of software known as "trackers" sought to translate the impenetrable code involved in programming sound into

simple visual interfaces that anyone could use. These trackers appeared on a variety of home computers throughout the 1980s from Commodore, Atari, and Amiga. Early home computers were marketed as machines with a wide variety of uses, with music production often highlighted as a possibility—a prospect that certainly appealed to consumers, considering the five-figure price tags of professional synthesizers at the time. (McAlpine 2019, 130-40). Unfortunately, most native interfaces for programming music continued to prove impenetrable to those without previous experience with programming electronic music. Even for those with this knowledge, music programming was still a highly time-consuming process.

To simplify and speed up their own music-making, many DIY electronic music composers programmed personalized tracking interfaces, such as Chris Hülsbeck's *SoundMonitor* (seen in figure 1), created in 1986 for the Commodore 64, the code for which was soon after published by C64 fan magazine *64'er* (McAlpine 2019, 130-131). As this and similar tracking interfaces became more widely available, the barrier to entry for creating music using home computers became lower and lower. In an interview with Kenneth McAlpine, music technology professor Chris Nash explains:

> This has several consequences. Firstly, it means there is little or no literacy barrier to writing music; users can experiment with the notation and use playback to understand the syntax and elements of music, taking an iterative, evolutionary approach to building melodies, harmonies, and whole pieces. Moreover, such rapid edit-audition cycles foster a focused, high-energy workflow, where the user is literally immersed in the sound of the music. This delicate balance of challenge and ability gives rise to "flow" experiences, supporting intrinsic motivation and creativity in a way sometimes lacking in other music user interfaces. (McAlpine 2019, 140)

In short, tracking interfaces played a huge role in expanding the membership of DIY computer musician communities beyond solely those with the time and dedication to teach themselves an opaque and arduous programming syntax (Driscoll and Diaz 2009, 3.1). The fact that these interfaces were also largely independently produced and distributed for free only further rooted the early chiptune community (or "demoscene," as practitioners call it) in ideologies of collectivism and cooperation.

Figure 1: Chris Hülsbeck's SoundMonitor V.1

Through the 1990s and early 2000s, independent game development had little presence outside of small, localized communities of dedicated fans, many of whom sought to break into the mainstream game industry (Parker et al. 2018, 1957-58). In his book *Handmade Pixels: Independent Video Games and the Quest for Authenticity*, Jesper Juul notes how the indie genre in games was established significantly later than indie genres in film and music, existing only as a small subculture of gamers until the late 2000s. He argues that because indie media seek aesthetics that run counter to mainstream trends, indie games as a markedly different cultural object could not truly exist prior to the codification of game design trends in the 1990s (Juul

2019, 20-25). Thus, while indie games had existed for quite some time in the sense that there were games produced and distributed independent of AAA production studios, these games nearly all still reflected a recognizable archetypal video game. As Juul puts it: "There was a period from roughly 1980 to 2005 *when we knew what video games were*" (6, emphasis original), and the emergence of the indie genre in the 2000s was a reaction to that normalized archetype.

Additionally, while the global financial collapse in 2007-2008 delivered a substantial blow to the independent film and music genres (facilitating an increased concentration of market share in the hands of the major studios and record labels), it did quite the opposite in the game industry. As many families worldwide faced financial hardship, video game consoles costing hundreds of dollars and massive AAA games costing $50-60 seemed like superfluous luxuries, leading many to seek out cheaper game options for consoles or opportunities for gaming on the smartphones or computers they likely already owned (Crogan 2018, 672). Due to its low production and distribution costs, considerable indie game development was already happening on these widely accessible platforms, meaning that the shift from console to mobile and PC gaming greatly expanded the audience available to many indie game developers. This set the stage for the emergence of the indie game genre as it is known today, arguably facilitated most significantly by the release of Jonathan Blow's wildly popular PC platformer *Braid* in 2008, shown in figure 2.

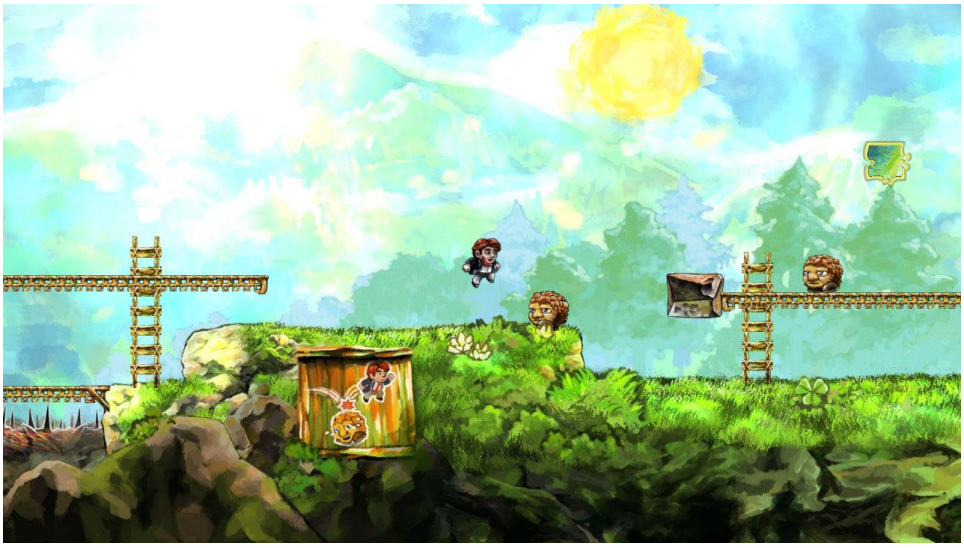

Figure 2: a screenshot from Jonathan Blow's Braid

Braid was a notable title for a number of reasons, its financial success perhaps chief among them. In a 2016 interview with IGN, Blow posits that "the reason braid is appreciated is that it was financially successful while also being a relatively large stretch from what games usual did." (IGN 2016) But *Braid* was not simply financially successful; it was a veritable gold mine, selling over 50,000 copies in its first week, quickly making back its entire $200,000 production budget and, by Blow's estimate, making over $4 million in revenue by 2014 (Blow 2014). At a time when financial downturned threatened numerous industries globally, the idea that a video game produced by a single individual could be so lucrative garnered much attention, and served to encourage other game developers who were considering striking out on their own in such an uncertain time and in such a volatile industry.

Later in the interview, Blow echoes many of Juul's characterizations of the emergence of the indie game genre, saying:

> There's a relatively large amount of luck, or serendipity, or just hitting the right thing at the right time. Which *Braid* also had, if *Braid* had come out a year later maybe it wouldn't have been as successful. . . . Usually if someone says "oh I'm gonna make a

> platformer on Xbox Live arcade" you would've had a picture of what that looks like and that picture in 2007 is very different from the picture in 2010 and *Braid* was one of the steps in that picture changing (IGN 2016, 3:37-4:23).

This role in inspiring new ideas of what games could look like—defying the universal sense of "what games were" noted by Juul—is another significant achievement for *Braid*. This shift between 2007 and 2010 was also fueled by a number of games that followed in *Braid*'s footsteps by borrowing visuals and mechanics from earlier eras of video game history like *Super Meat Boy* (2010) and *FEZ* (2012).

While *Braid* was responsible for establishing new visual and mechanical identities for the indie genre, it was *FEZ* that first popularized borrowing the *sounds* of 8-bit games as well.[8] While pixel visuals and simple mechanics like platforming were simply logical choices for indie games in 2008 due to their low cost and easy implementation, the same is not necessarily true for chiptune music. By the late 2000s, serviceable sound libraries could be accessed at a low-enough cost that even indie developers on shoestring budgets could afford to outfit their games with lush orchestral soundtracks (as in *Braid*) or emulate popular genres like rock (as in *Super Meat Boy*). The use of chiptune music in *FEZ* was thus not a necessity but an intentional aesthetic choice.[9]

While the use of 8-bit visuals and mechanics already link the indie game genre to general notions of opposing mainstream trends and pushing creative boundaries, the use of

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[8] For an example of gameplay from *Fez,* see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIQIcOlCxas.
[9] Interestingly, *FEZ* soundtrack composer Richard *Vreeland* actually saw himself as departing from chiptunes in many ways with the game. He tells Kotaku: "I think it's easy for others to see it as being a chip soundtrack, but I tried to move away from that a bit while still using some of the same sounds. There's a lot of reverb everywhere, which helps to make things a bit paddier, and more reminiscent of 80s synth scores than chiptunes," (Hamilton 2012). The use of 80s synthesizer timbres in conjunction with or in place of chiptunes is a trend that has also been popularized over the past decade and is certainly a topic worthy of future research.

chiptune music serves to establish a connection to the collectivist spirit of the demoscene as well, strengthening the sense of indie being not just a game *genre*, but a game *community*. The sense of communal unity and well-being is crucial to the identity of the indie game genre According to Juul 2019, "the claim for culturally independent games . . . is not simply that independent games are *better products*, but that they are politically, morally, and aesthetically wholesome: independent games are better, but developers also will lead better lives, and society at large will be improved by increased communication between people" (34). In this way the indie game genre represents community in opposition to not just the aesthetics of mainstream video games, but to the associated politics and morals as well.

This opposition can be placed on a timeline, with mainstream gaming representing the current cultural moment in games and indie gaming representing the (perhaps idealized) culture of gaming in the 1990s. Patrick Crogan draws a distinction between the "neoliberal player" of today and the "liberal player" of the 90s, arguing: "The neoliberal player plays in a world where the distinction between work and play makes little sense, and every activity is approached as the opportunity to increase one's personal capital through achievements, reputation markers, awards, and so on," in contrast to the liberal player, who is "looking for opportunities for self-expression or actualization," using games simply as a form of entertainment (Crogan 2018, 676-77). While there are certainly exceptions to this characterization of the shift in gaming over the past two decades, there is no denying that games, too, have been significantly influenced by the neoliberal project of commodifying everything through the imbuing of use-value.

One explanation for the growth of this neoliberal ideology in gaming is as a response to the common criticism of gaming as a "waste of time." After all, if a player can point to some easily conceptualized benefit gained from playing a game (e.g., an increase in social capital or

standing), then the time invested in doing so can hardly be called "wasted." The phenomenon of gaining social standing through gaming, while present in the 1990s and early 2000s, has only grown in recent years with the increased presence of public leaderboards and ease of sharing accomplishments in gaming with others through social media. Of course, this is also connected to the general ways in which neoliberal ideology encourages the commodification of the self, so that there is not only a pressure to extract use-value from gaming as a means of proving them worthwhile, but also an internal desire to increase one's own value as a commodity through the building up of public-facing skills and accolades at all times, even while playing games.

The pervasive search for use-value in game soundtracks has similarly become a project of players, developers, and academics alike. Consider Collins's theorization of game music as nondynamic, adaptive, or interactive based on how it does or does not change in response to player actions (Collins 2008a, 125-27). This classification scheme reflects how many players interact with game music, looking out for the ways it cues important information for their safety (e.g., when particular enemies are nearby in *Silent Hill*) or foreshadows a significant change of game state (e.g., a shift from daytime to nighttime in *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker*). For AAA titles, it is practically a given at this point that the music will adapt to some degree to the actions taken by the player or changes in the game environment. In fact, if this information—this use-value—is nowhere to be found in the music of a game, many players will even go into the options menu and turn it off so as to prevent distraction or annoyance after repeated hearings (Jorgensen 2008, 173). The responsibility for finding the use of the soundtrack is simultaneously the responsibility of the player, in order to improve their gameplay, the academic, in order to provide legitimacy to the medium, and the developer, in order to facilitate both of the previous two ends—receiving little to not attention if it fails to do so.

Thus, the use of chiptune music in indie games can be seen as a return not just to the perception of unified community and collectivist attitudes in video game cultures in the 1990s, but also to the purely aesthetic purposes served by that music in those games. Retro aesthetics in indie games signify a return to a time when the music to accompany games was appreciated because it sounded interesting and marked a significant technical achievement, rather than interrogated in search of information useful for maximizing one's rate of progression through the game. Obviously, this is an exaggeration based at least somewhat on an idealized view of gaming in the 90s (a notion that will receive discussion below). That said, it still reflects how there is a sense of opposing contemporary game ideologies within the indie genre through a return to a time when utopia had momentarily been achieved amongst gamers, even if that utopia is largely a fabrication.

Departing From the 8-bit

And yet despite all of the ways the use of 8-bit aesthetics represent particular indie values, indie developers seem to be departing more and more from the trend in recent years. As with many cultural phenomena of the past few decades, the adaptation of capitalist ideology to the postmodern era is a huge consideration. Fredric Jameson argues that capitalist ideology has invaded the very fabric of postmodern thought such that "everyone is now willing to mumble . . . that no society can function efficiently without the market and that planning is obviously impossible," and that these ideological concessions have allowed the growth of the corporate oligopoly model to go not only unchecked but even celebrated (Jameson 1991, 263). Where the very existence of forms of perpetual commodification exemplified through streaming services and video game microtransactions may have once been a point of ideological contention, they have now been accepted into our culture largely unquestioned—if the market has shown these models to be acceptable then they must be acceptable, even if the sacrifices necessary for their

existence fall disproportionately on the workers (musicians, game developers, etc.) producing the commodities.

In place of critique of the corporate conglomerates that benefit from these systems has come a near-religious admiration, originating from an assumption that if an individual or group of individuals has been able to achieve such a degree of success, it must be because of their exceptional work ethic or business strategy, as that is what the market rewards. Thus, the idea of a corporation entering into another avenue of production (such as Google creating their video game console, the Stadia) is not alarming but rather, exciting. This excitement is particularly prevalent when a corporation is seen as uplifting the voices of creators, be they game developers, musicians, visual artists, who otherwise would not have the opportunity to reach such a wide audience. In the music world, this phenomenon was exemplified by the rise of the world music genre in the 1980s and 1990s, where large music corporations like Columbia records would search for non-Western musics (particularly of African, East Asian, and Middle Eastern origin) to record and bring to Western markets. While the idea of expanding the audience for particular music traditions around the world is not inherently exploitative, its execution under the reductive and fetishizing label "world music" by massive corporations looking chiefly to maximize profit is certainly worthy of critique. The permissibility of this type of practice has led to a paradoxical phenomenon wherein markets seem to be more accessible than ever as new avenues to create cultural commodities (music, games, etc.) are constantly opening while the power to market and distribute them is only becoming more concentrated in the hands of a few massive corporations—what Adam Krims calls and "increasingly centralized economic organization" of a "diversified cultural result" (Krims 2012, 102).

In considering the construction of the world music genre, Timothy Taylor suggests that the label itself, what he calls the "genrefication" of these disparate musical cultures, was central

to the capitalist project of transforming them into an accessible commodity for a Western market (Taylor 2016, 89-90). Similarly, the notion of a unified indie genre of game allows for its exploitation as a cultural commodity. The indie genre was originally defined by its opposition to game production studios—its independence from them, yet in the past decade, the label has taken on further implications, as Crogan notes "referring variously to a mode of production, a style of game design or visual aesthetics, a legal/economic description, . . . or an ethos or cultural scene of production and reception" (Crogan 2018, 674). While not inherent to the idea of games produced independent of large production studios, the indie genre has become powerfully linked to cultural nostalgia and more specifically, 8-bit aesthetics. Take, for instance, Andra Ivănescu's discussion of the popularization of retro games, which argues "the prominence of 'retro games' can be seen as a result of both practical limitations in indie development . . . but also as a stand against the size of the video games it produces, signaling an 'indie' ethos" (Ivănescu 2019, 14). While not intended to be a statement about the indie genre, Ivănescu here conflates a retro ethos with an indie one, and not just in a general sense of looking backwards, "retro" here refers to a very particular 8-bit aesthetic as she goes on to describe the "endearing pixelated worlds" of these retro games. This is not to criticize Ivănescu for making this aesthetic assumption; on the contrary, the conflation of retro, indie, and 8-bit is a very understandable and common shorthand that exemplifies the degree to which the indie label has become genrefied (in Taylor's sense) under the aesthetic umbrella of nostalgia and, more specifically, 8-bit.

The nostalgic trend in game design of the late 2000s reflects a larger cultural nostalgia that has been theorized in film by Jameson (1991) and Marc Le Sueur (1977), among others, and only grown in the intervening decade. Lindsay Ellis (2020) analyzes how two recent media franchises, the most recent film adaptation of Stephen King's *It* (2017) and the Netflix TV series

Stranger Things (2016-present), reflect recent nostalgia for the 1980s—exactly in line with the notion of the "30-year cycle" in pop culture wherein music, film, fashion, and other cultural trends exhibit heavy inspiration from (and nostalgia for) the decade 30 years prior (e.g. the 1990s *Austin Powers* reflecting the 1960s). Ellis optimistically suggests that these nostalgic forms of media allow their consumers to use the past as a productive form of escape, to observe how, even though every era has had its significant challenges (be they wars, economic downturns, political scandals, or the like), humanity seems to have continued "carrying on" and perhaps, if history truly does repeat itself, we too can "carry on" through whatever challenges we as a society may face in the present. Jameson (1991) is a bit less optimistic, arguing that these reflections on the past are symptomatic of a desperate need to find identity in/for the present. After all, if the 1980s are able to be so easily recalled in media like *Stranger Things*, should we not also be able to summon up such a specific identity for the present? He ultimately suggests that this search only ever results in a reminder of the impossibility of the task as one realizes past decades were not in reality so unified as our contemporary images of them suggest—that humanity has perhaps always been plagued by what Jameson artfully calls a "peculiar aimlessness" (296).

While these 30-year cycles have been occurring since the mid-twentieth century, in decades prior to the 1980s, video games held little if any cultural significance. It was not until the mid-1980s with the release of home consoles like the Atari VCS and Nintendo Entertainment System that gaming gained mainstream cultural traction and the late-1980s and early-1990s that many of the games and consoles with the longest-lasting cultural impact were

released.[10] While an indie gaming aesthetic largely inspired by these memories has served as a marker of opposition to mainstream pop culture for some time, it has, in just the past few years, come to coincide with the larger pop cultural 30-year cycle in celebrating the late 80s and early 90s. A momentary coincidence of indie game aesthetic with mainstream pop culture is not by default a bad thing, and one should be careful to avoid fetishizing the trope of the starving artist to the point that popularity becomes antithetical to artistic and cultural value. Yet there is still danger in maintaining a communal identity rooted in the 8-bit aesthetic as this aesthetic becomes, increasingly, a source of profit for neoliberal capitalism. It is perhaps in fear of that commodification and subsequent exploitation of the indie genre that many game developers have recent departed from the 8-bit in favor of new aesthetic identifiers outside the mainstream cultural norm.

The attraction of this cultural norm towards specific artifacts and aesthetics of roughly 30 years ago exemplifies a mode of nostalgia Svetlana Boym calls "restorative." The restorative is that which focuses on rebuilding and returning; it is "the imperfect process of remembrance" which "manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments to the past" (Boym 2007, 41). Largely realized through artifacts (genuine or replicated) of a place or time for remembering, restoring, in Boym's sense, often involves some degree of obscuring as well, whether it is unintentional, as among those remembering with an optimistic wistfulness, or exploitative, i.e. for the purposes of wringing capital out of the prior group. Western (in particular, American) culture has taken this practice of commodifying wistful remembrance to the point of

[10] Examples these games and consoles include *The Legend of Zelda* (1986), *Super Mario World* (1990), and *Sonic the Hedgehog* (1991) on the Sega Genesis (1989) and the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (1990), among others.

capitalizing on the desires of consumers who do not even have their own memories of a given time period. Boym explains:

> Whereas the objects of past regimes were carefully purged from sight in Eastern Europe as well as in China and Southeast Asia, . . . in the West objects of the past are everywhere for sale. The past eagerly cohabits with the present. Americans are supposed to be antihistorical, yet the souvenirization of the past and obsession with roots and identity here are ubiquitous. One could speak about "inculcation of nostalgia" into merchandise as a marketing strategy that tricks consumers into missing what they haven't lost. (38)

This turn of "tricking consumers into missing what they haven't lost," while certainly useful for selling nostalgic artifacts, also serves to inspire pride and devotion for corporations seen as historically significant. Take, for example, the phenomenon of gamers identifying themselves as loyal to either PlayStation or Xbox, denouncing the opposing console (and its users) with a powerful vitriol. While the intensity of this rivalry has lessened in recent years due to the increase of gaming occurring on PCs rather than game consoles, this dichotomy is still one many gamers have internalized.

This phenomenon of corporate fandom is only a microcosm of the way in which neoliberal consumers identify with (or fashion themselves through) the commodities they choose to consume. Just as gamers have allegiances to PlayStation or Xbox, capitalist consumers define themselves by the clothes they purchase and wear, the restaurants at which they do or do not eat, the car they drive, or any number of other purchasable products. In writing on branding and media culture, Adam Arvidsson (2006) notes "Brands [in the 1980s] became something of an omnipresent tool by means of which identity, social relations and shared experiences . . . could be constructed. They were spun into the social fabric as a ubiquitous medium for the construction of a common social world" (4). And this notion of branding defining sociality has

only accelerated into the twenty-first century, to the point that now nearly any choice an individual makes regarding consumption of goods can be seen as a reflection of personal identity. In this way, the choice to play primarily indie games becomes a form of self-making by positioning oneself in opposition to the mainstream—indie game players and developers become an indie community.

While this indie community is intentionally unified in opposition to mainstream gaming and all the neoliberal capitalist trappings there within, neoliberalism has already established a strategy for capitalizing on that very form of opposition. Robin James (2015) argues that "resilience," or the ability to maintain a perceived "health" in the face of hardship and struggle, has become a central tenet in evaluating artistic, political, economic, and personal experience. She explains: "If resilience is the new means of production, this means that crisis and trauma are actually necessary, desirable phenomena—you can't bounce back without first falling" (5). James later expands further on how resilience discourse not only works to exploit trauma for the purposes of "improving" oneself, but also uses that resistance to continue entrenching the very systems that created the trauma in the first place:

> Neoliberalism upgrades systems designed to secure against, conquer, or otherwise "cover" (to use James Snead's term) damage; the point of the upgrade is to make these systems more efficient means of social and economic management. Instead of expending resources to *avoid* damage, resilience discourse *recycles damage into more resources*. Resilience discourse thus follows a very specific logic: first, damage is incited and made manifest; second, that damage is spectacularly overcome, and that overcoming is broadcast and/or shared, so that; third, the person who has overcome is rewarded with increased human capital, status, and other forms of recognition and recompense, because: finally, and most importantly, this individual's own resilience boosts society's

> resilience. The work this individual does to overcome their own damage generates surplus value for hegemonic institutions—this is what distinguishes "resilience" in the narrow sense from other forms of recovery or therapy. (James 2015, 7)

While I might hesitate to elevate to level of struggle indie game developers and consumers endure in opposition to the hegemonic AAA institutions to "trauma," there is certainly still a level at which indie developers are seen as "overcoming" certain challenges like low budgets, minimal staff, and lack of marketing and distribution resources—and those who can do so the most spectacularly are celebrated the most. This phenomenon is only compounded by what McAlpine (2019) calls "the romantic notion of the isolated author-genius," a trope that was valorized in early chiptune communities and continues to be valorized today (239).

Take, for instance, the production of *Undertale* (2014), a game which many players and critics alike would agree stands on its own merits with its compelling plot, engaging characters, unique battle system, and impressive chiptune soundtrack. While all of these traits have certainly been points of praise for the game, the aspect emphasized perhaps more than any other has been the fact that it was created near-entirely by a single person and funded by fan donations through a Kickstarter campaign. *Undertale*'s designer, Toby Fox, demonstrated *resilience* by overcoming his lack of specialized staff and production capital necessary to complete the project (as Fox put it on the Kickstarter page: "First, I will absorb the money into my bloodstream and use it to fuel the creation of this game. With your contributions I will be able to support myself and focus on the game" (2013). Fox's success and celebration implicitly encourages other game developers to simply continue pushing on through their struggles, and encourages them to believe that with enough hard work they too can achieve the same success as Toby Fox and *Undertale*.—He has become the newest instantiation of the "isolated author-genius" figure for fans and other indie game developers to valorize.

At a higher level, the very notion of defining the indie genre by one producer and one game serves neoliberal capitalist ends by collapsing the varied forms of creative work occurring across the genre into a single unified aesthetic that can more easily be packaged and resold. When the indie genre comes to be defined by 8-bit aesthetics, it risks loss of its oppositional identity and absorption into the larger hegemonic video game mainstream as just another genre defined by aesthetics or gameplay, simply an additional market that the neoliberal capitalist system can seek to corner.

The Present and Future in Indie

And so members of the indie game community find themselves confronted with something of an imperative: keep reinventing or risk getting consumed by the ever-growing capitalist machine. This brings our discussion to the indie game community of today and the practices and ideologies they seem to have adopted in response to that existential threat. Juul (2019) argues that the current indie game genre is largely split between two starkly contrasting trends, with somber "art" games that attempt to tackle challenging issues and tell difficult stories at one end and goofy absurdist games that inspire a "child-like wonder" through their silly premises and glitchy mechanics at the other. These two aesthetic categories, while diametrically opposed, both intend to exemplify authenticity in their own ways, an ideal that Juul argues defines much of the indie genre today.

Games at the somber, "artistic" end of this spectrum seek to show authenticity by sharing very human-centered, real-life experiences that contrast with the epic tales AAA games like *The Elder Scrolls* or *Halo* franchises tend to tell. This can often take the form of common emotional experiences that, while not invoking the same epic scale as battling massive monsters threatening to destroy the world in *Final Fantasy XV* (2016) or journeying hundreds of miles to

uncover shocking ancient secrets in *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (2017)—are more readily identifiable to many players.

In this subgenre of indie game, supporting a game's affective dimension is the chief task of its soundtrack—in many ways closer to scoring practices in film than in games. Janet Staiger (2020) explains that music and sound in many films serves an important role in fulfilling certain affective expectations based on the audience's understanding of the work's genre (248). These affective expectations in the artistic indie game can range from sorrow, pain, and anger all the way to hope, joy, and catharsis. The commonality is that these affects are expected to be sincere and narratively coherent. That is, music that seems to in some way contradict the perceived message, imagery, or narrative of a game would be unexpected in this subgenre of indie game, as those musical practices are more suggestive of comedy or horror. A soundtrack serving to sincerely support a narratively coherent affective trajectory ideally avoids drawing attention away from impactful story elements or game experiences, often by emulating drama and romance film scoring practices with which players are likely to already be familiar.

This can be seen in *Celeste* (2018), which follows a young girl, Madeline, who feels an intense need to ascend Celeste Mountain simply to prove to herself that she is capable of doing so.[11] A metaphor for depression and anxiety, the primary foe faced on her journey is a copy of herself clothed in all black who frequently spits scathing comments about Madeline's history of hiding or running from challenges. For most of the game, Madeline repeatedly tells herself that all she needs is to escape this version of herself—to leave it behind on the mountain. It isn't until the very end of the game that she comes to the realization that what she needs is not to abandon this negative part of herself, but to forgive and embrace it, to learn and grow from it.

[11] For an example of gameplay from *Celeste*, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vY3A8T0h0Dg.

Upon this realization, the two versions of Madeline combine into one, providing her with greater abilities and allowing her to summit the mountain.

Even though the plot of *Celeste* likely does not reflect commonplaces experiences for most players, particularly in its occasional supernatural elements, the game connects with many players because of how readily identifiable many of the feelings Madeline expresses (as well as the insults she heaps on herself) are in their own lives. In this way, the emotions it represents fulfil the role of a meaningful touchstone to provide the ethos of authenticity expected in the indie game genre. The soundtrack to the game largely features piano and synthesized pad sounds with few explicitly recognizable melodies. When there are harsher timbres more reminiscent of chiptunes, they are typically only in the melodic layer, accompanied by gentler strings, piano, and synthesizers to counterbalance that harshness. That said, chiptune timbres do feature more prominently in the extra challenging versions of each level (known as the B-sides) that are unlocked by completing optional puzzles found within the original levels. The B-sides have no narrative consequences for the game, existing only as extra content for those players who wish to challenge themselves through more skill-intensive gameplay. In this case, chiptune music is used more as a signifier of difficulty rather than a meaningful contributor to the game's affective dimension,[12] instead using the aforementioned synthesizer and piano to affectively underscore moments of significant plot development.

The artistic-minded subgenre of indie game will also often establish authenticity by directly invoking the real-life developer(s) as a part of the story. One of the most powerful

[12] The conflation of chiptune with difficulty (and, thereby, player "skill") reflects a broader trend of separating "casual" gamers from more serious "real" gamers in pop culture by suggesting that those players who are skillful enough to reach this content are the same players who would appreciate chiptune music because of personal experience with games and consoles of the 90s or at minimum an appreciation of the time period in gaming. For further reading on so-called "casual" gaming, see Leaver and Willson 2016.

examples of this is Ryan and Amy Green's 2016 game *That Dragon, Cancer*, based on the Greens' real-life experience coping with the life and death of their son, Joel, who was diagnosed with terminal cancer at the age of one.[13] The game invites the player to experience many of the most significant moments faced by the family from Ryan's and Amy's own perspectives, with personal narrations from both as well as real-life voicemails and letters of encouragement from friends and family. Through the game's 14 short vignettes, the player doesn't simply observe what happened, but is invited to experience all the emotional highs and lows that accompanied the events and gain a deeper understanding of Ryan and Amy's journey. By sharing such a challenging and ultimately devastating personal experience, the Greens reposition themselves not as faceless game developers providing a commodity for players to consume, but as entire people who invite others to identify with their very human process of coping with grief. Because of this, *That Dragon, Cancer* has provided many players an outlet for coping with the losses of loved ones in their own lives in a way that would not be possible without its salient human presence.

The soundtrack to *That Dragon, Cancer* uses strings and piano to underscore its affective trajectory, largely conforming to orchestral scoring traditions from the dramatic film genre. That said, perhaps the most significant sonic contribution to the affective dimension is from the human voice. The narration provided by Ryan and Amy Green serves as a powerful reminder that the characters the player is observing are not just fictional entities, but representations of real-life people. The power of the human voice in the game is most clearly seen in a moment when the whole Green family (Ryan, Amy, and their three sons, including Joel) go to a pond to

[13] For an example of gameplay from *That Dragon, Cancer*, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e30a1DpKWvg. The segment re-enacting the Green's visit to the pond occurs at 0:00-3:30.

feed ducks. The audio in this scene is not performed explicitly for the game, as with much of the narration, but rather an actual recording that was taken that day at the park. In it, the player hears the other two Green children asking questions pertaining Joel's development like why Joel can't speak at the age of five and whether they expect him to be able to read someday. Amidst the sounds of water lapping on the shore, ducks quacking, and Joel happily giggling, Ryan and Amy turn the conversation to instead focus on things Joel can do, such as laughing and showing his family that he loves them. The player doesn't just hear an explanation or recreation of a conversation coming from Ryan and Amy, they hear the entire family exactly as they were on that day. By using this real-life audio, the sound in *That Dragon, Cancer* doesn't just strive for affective coherence, it provides that which is most coherent of all, the sound as it truly happened.

Juul's other subgenre that accompanies the somber, artistic game in encompassing much of the indie game genre in recent years is the goofy, irreverent game. While making innovative design choices has always been a significant part of indie game ethos, as previously discussed, the past couple years have shown an acceleration of this desire to innovate to such a point that in some ways, uniqueness can come to be valued above any other aspect of a game (Campbell 2020). Take, for example, the upcoming 2020 release *An Airport for Aliens Currently Run by Dogs*, designed by Xalavier Nelson Jr. as part of a studio aptly named "Strange Scaffold." The game is effectively a series of errands that involve obtaining various objects requested by dogs stationed throughout an airport where everything is written in an alien language. The actual gameplay mechanics are of little consequence; truly, the central purpose of *Dog Airport Game* (the shorthand Nelson uses to refer to it) is to showcase the nonsensical nature of its premise. This title enters into a growing collection of goofy, irreverent games in the indie genre like *Goat Simulator* (2014), in which the player (playing as a goat) gains points through various random

tasks including jumping on trampolines and blowing up gas stations, *I am Bread* (2015), where the player must maneuver a slice of bread across a kitchen filled with dangerous obstacles to arrive at a toaster on the other side of the room, and the previously discussed *Untitled Goose Game* (2019), tasking its users (playing as an unnamed goose) with wreaking as much havoc as possible in a small town by picking up and carrying around a wide variety of objects.

Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy (2017) is a particularly self-referential example of the irreverent subgenre.[14] In the game, the player controls a nude man inexplicably confined to a cauldron from the waist down who is also inexplicably using a pickaxe to climb a mountain of random objects. The seemingly simple task is made more challenging by unintuitive and inconsistent controls and by the design of the mountain, which creates a number of inflection points where, if the user makes a mistake, they will fall a significant distance back down the mountain, losing quite a bit of progress. All the while, the player hears a soundtrack of smooth jazz alongside a narration from the titular Bennett Foddy (the designer of the game) on the nature of struggle and perseverance, clearly intended to further aggravate the player as they attempt the frustrating task. Little about the game has any sort of coherence, narrative or otherwise. Never is the player told just *why* they should be climbing this mountain, who the protagonist is, or how he found himself in his present circumstances. Similarly, the presence of the smooth jazz and narration is never given an explanation, either. All these details are, in many ways, intended to be as incoherent as possible.

[14] For an example of gameplay from *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy*, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NnCtRm1Kug4.

Untitled Goose Game similarly provides no explanation for its aesthetic incoherencies.[15] In it, one plays as a goose seeking to wreak as much havoc as possible throughout a small town by picking up and moving around various objects such as a gardener's tools and a saleswoman's wares. The townspeople respond with anger, shouting at the goose and chasing it down to retrieve the displaced and stolen objects. The ultimate goal (although not revealed to the player until the very end of the game) is to retrieve a bell which is then carried all the way back through the town, attracting the attention of every townsperson previously tormented by the goose. Upon returning to the location at which they started the game, the player is directed to a previously hidden spot where they discover a whole pile of bells identical to the one they have just obtained—this is clearly not the first time the events of the game have happened in this universe. Indeed, the pile of bells implies that the goose has, numerous times upon completion of its search, simply begun again from the beginning, thus tormenting the townspeople time and time again. The unending repetition of this seemingly meaningless task readily calls to mind Camus' Sisyphus—a textbook example of the absurd (Camus 1991).

This action is accompanied by Claude Debussy's piano preludes, recorded into an adaptive system that lilts faster and slower corresponding to how effectively the player is sowing discord at any given moment. Harmony between the townspeople and the goose is accompanied by disjointed notes with unclear rhythmic or metric organization while chaos inspires full-fledged works flowing in time as originally composed. The idea of adaptive music becoming more distorted when players are less effective in achieving the intended goal is something many players are familiar with. In the *Guitar Hero* franchise, for example, only highly

[15] For an example of gameplay from *Untitled Goose Game*, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gruIyw_AHYE. The segment carrying the bell back through the game environment occurs at 1:15:49-1:21:36.

accurate performances of songs will faithfully reproduce their original recordings, while mistakes are signaled through the introduction of additional distortion and wrong notes. Even so, using classical music, with its popular connotations of elegance, grace, and class, to accompany the decidedly ungraceful behavior of the titular goose, is another instance of aesthetic incoherence in the indie game genre. Here, there is also a meta-textual incoherence between Debussy as an example of high-class art and thought and the common perception of video games as an infantile form of entertainment intended primarily for children. Both *Untitled Goose Game* and *Getting Over it with Bennett Foddy*, demonstrate how the aesthetic markers of the irreverent indie subgenre are not intended to serve a supporting function for gameplay or narrative. Rather than striving for a high degree of coherence between gameplay, narrative, and aesthetic as with most video games, they primarily seek to invoke ideas of high art, culture, and philosophy that clash with their goofy, illogical premises, maximizing aesthetic, formal, and narrative *in*coherence.

These two subgenres that currently encompass most of the indie game genre clearly have little in common as the artistic side exemplifies authenticity through aesthetic coherence while the irreverent side does quite the opposite. The thing that binds together the wide variety of games representing these disparate design philosophies under the umbrella of "indie" is not their formal, mechanical, or aesthetic elements. Neither is it exclusively their modes of production (despite the implications of the genre label). Rather, recent indie games are united by their intent to defy ever-changing norms in gaming—be they social, formal, aesthetic, narrative, or otherwise—through their wide variety of constantly evolving strategies.

Conclusion

I do not intend to imply that chiptunes have altogether vanished or become taboo in the indie game genre. Pixelated visuals in particular are still quite commonplace. The shift has

indeed been mostly ideological. As relics of the 1990s have begun appearing throughout mainstream pop culture, chiptunes among them, the sound aesthetics of the time period have been robbed of some of their ideological weight. That is, players today are less likely to interpret the use of chiptune sounds in a game soundtrack as an explicit invocation of game relics and cultures of the 1990s, as it could just as easily be inspired by simply looking at current popular aesthetic trends.

My goal with this study has been show that the rapidly changing and fracturing aesthetic norms in indie games in recent years are not a sign of a growing meaninglessness for the genre label or a "death of genre" in video games more broadly. I have demonstrated the ways in which these shifting trends simply highlight how the indie game genre as an object of study is a whole different beast from established genre labels based on formal design elements, and thus calls for different methodologies to reach satisfactory conclusions. Considering the material cultures of the indie game genre reveals an ideological underpinning that drives (or perhaps even necessitates) a lack of aesthetic and formal unity. To use Eric Drott's language, it is not a static *group* of aesthetic and formal elements but a dynamic *grouping*, constantly redefined to include whatever most closely aligns with its ideological goals at the time.

A notable benefit of this theorization of the indie genre is how it easily accommodates additional genre labels based on formal function, whereas an understanding based on elements of production may prove flawed when it comes in contact with games touting dual-genre identifications like "indie strategy" or "indie racing." In fact, in adopting a model of the indie genre based on the shifting ideological implications of game elements, we also gain the ability to recognize the ways even genre categories predominantly defined by their formal practices can be more or less conducive to indie development based on the shifting valuations of the practices they comprise. For example, if a survey of popular games suggests popular trends

include open worlds with opportunities for exploration and a wealth of secondary content like side-quests and crafting skills, indie game players may prove less interested in genres that traditionally feature those design elements such as RPGs and adventure games.

Finally, theorizing the indie game genre in terms of ideological motivations highlights the personal investment or even devotion felt by many of the biggest fans of the genre. While it is common for individuals to gravitate towards game genres that tend to feature mechanics they appreciate, and even to bond with other gamers over those shared appreciations, the way the indie genre is felt by many players to be a *community* would seem to be unique. Any theorization of the indie genre that fails to account for this central difference will inevitably fall short of capturing what players truly mean when they invoke a love of indie games: beyond an appreciation for a style of sound and image or gameplay mechanic, the indie genre for many represents an ideology, a revolutionary way of thinking and of playing.

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